DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 302 FL 010 712

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TITLE Discourse and Second Language Acquisition of Yes/ No Questions. Proceedings of the Los Angeles Second Language Research Forum (1st, Los Angeles, California, February 11-13, 1977).
PUB DATE Jun 77
NOTE 16p.: One of several papers presented at the Los Angeles Second Language Forum.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communicative Competence (Languages): *Discourse Analysis: Grammar: *Intonation: *Language Research: Prediction: Second Language Instruction: *Second Language Learning: *Sentence Structure: Speech Communication: Syntax
IDENTIFIERS *Questions

ABSTRACT

This study investigates why researchers have trouble determining when learners acquire inverted and statement forms of yes/no questions. Researchers have difficulty designing studies on this subject because this area of language is not fully rule-governed or systematic. The choice of the form may be based on two speakers' foreknowledge of each other, the context of the question utterance, and/or the question's relationship to prior utterances in the dialogue. The question form used is also governed by the degree of pre-supposition of a yes or no answer. The function of the question to elicit information, to change the topic, to indicate understanding or confirmation, to display interest, and to encourage, also contributes to determining whether an inverted question form or a statement form with rising intonation will be used. When questions formed by six Spanish-speaking free-learners of English were compared to those formed by native English speakers, it remained difficult to judge the appropriateness of the question form used because the experimenter could not know the degree of presupposition on the question-asker's part. With a non-native speaker, there is no variable which reflects whether he has internalized the interrelationship between the form and pre-supposition. Without this, language researchers cannot ascertain when the acquisition of inverted and statement question forms occurs in second language learners. (PMJ)

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# Discourse and Second Language Acquisition of Yes/No Questions

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine a problem in second language acquisition research: why is it that second language researchers have trouble determining when learners acquire inverted and statement forms of yes/no questions? We use the terms inverted and statement form when talking about the surface form of a yes/no question. By inverted form, we mean those questions with the auxiliary element (do-support, modals, auxiliary have or be) preceding the subject NP, such as 'Do you like artichokes?' By statement form, we mean those which have the surface form of a declarative sentence but with a rising intonation, for example, 'You like artichokes?' For the sake of simplicity, this study does not deal with negative yes/no questions or tag questions.

The acquisition of a number of different morphemes has been studied in second language acquisition research in recent years, and it had been assumed that the acquisition of inversion in yes/no questions would follow similar lines as the acquisition of other morphemes. As part of a project carried out at Harvard by Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1974), the researchers examined non-native speakers' acquisition of English interrogatives. It was hypothesized that in both yes/no questions and Wh-questions a progression from uninverted to inverted forms would be observed. A developmental progression of this sort was found for WH-questions, but no developmental pattern could be discerned in the acquisition of yes/no questions. The researchers had operated under the assumption that inversion in yes/no questions was largely optional but that transposition of subject NP and auxiliary would probably increase during the course of acquisition without even reaching 100%. Their findings, however, did not support this hypothesis. In fact, the percentage of inversion fluctuated up and down from session to session; no increase in inversion was evident over time. The researchers concluded that in English, inversion in yes/no questions is not optional, but that it is probably dependent on contextual and situational veriables. It was felt that if the discourse conditions which required inverted and statement forms could be defined, then perhaps a developmental pattern for the acquisition of yes/no questions could be discovered.

Salama (1973) specified seven environments in which statement form questions can be used, but concluded that the production of this form is both a matter of idiolect, in that some people use it more than others, and also a matter of what she calls "mental set," in that an individual may use it at one time very frequently and at another time very infrequently.

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Schlue (1975) examined speech data from taped television shows and from the transcripts of the White House Tapes. On the basis of this data, she developed hypotheses about when the statement form is appropriate and when it is not. She then tested these hypotheses on native speakers of English. She found that three of Salama's seven categories were sufficent to classify all the statement form questions found in her data.

Independently from Schlue, as a prelude to analyzing the acquisition of yes/no questions in English by a second language learner, Vander Brook (1975) defined some discourse conditions which control inverted and statement form yes/no questions. She pointed out that,

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while Salama's work defined several statement form question environments, it did not indicate that the environment can make either the inverted or statement form obligatory.

2. Yes/no questions in discourse

When this study began, the intent was to formalize the constraints on inversion in such a way that we could return to the Cazden et al study and see how inverted and statement forms are acquired. We began by arguing that if language is rule-governed behavior, then the choice between inverted and statement form should be systematic and therefore predictable. Thus we defined conditions under which one would expect inverted form and conditions under which one would expect statement form, and were able to account for a certain amount of the data. However, the rest did not follow our predictions. If the hypothesis that all aspects of language are rule-governed is correct, we had failed to find the right generalizations to account for all the data. In this case, an examination of a larger corpus of natural language data should reveal the systematicity. On the other hand, the hypothesis itself might be incorrect. In that case, the choice between inverted and statement form is non-systematic and a true optionality of form exists. The fact that we predicted the form in some cases would be due to chance under this view.

A third alternative, which we support, is that it is not meaningful to regard this area of language strictly in terms of systematicity. Our work shows that the main factor involved in determining the form of yes/no questions is not binary, but is best seen as a continuum. We would make the general claim that when there are non-binary factors controlling a process in language, only when the factors are at extreme ends of their continuums is it meaningful to speak of the behavior in question as systematic or predictable. Because when they are at extreme ends, it is as if they were binary. When they are not at the extremes, a particular behavior does not necessarily reflect a quantifiable amount of the factors. We hope to illustrate this position in our discussion of yes/no question form below.

2.1 Interplay of foreknowledge and relevance.

It seems that what a speaker says relates to the previous speaker's utterance and is relevant to it in both speakers' minds. Thus a speaker doesn't say just anything, or even anything that may be related in his mind to what the previous speaker has said, but makes sure his utterance will be relevant from the previous speaker's viewpoint too. This kind of pragmatic judgment of appropriateness is reflected in the form an utterance takes.

Assume two speakers, A and B, have just met at a party. They share a great deal of knowledge and beliefs about the world and each other. But there are many details that they don't share. To see how this affects the form of their utterances, let us assume the following exchange takes place:

(1) A: My husband and I are going on vacation next week.

B: 1. Where are you going?
2. Are you going down South?
3. You're going down South?
4. You're going down South.

First note that any of the possible utterances B1-4, by repeating a part of A's statement (subject + verb) would appear to relate to it. But repetition alone need not be equivalent to relevance. In choosing the most relevant response from B1-4, B's choice will be affected by his knowledge about A. Thus if we were observers of this conversation and heard A's statement followed by B1, we would assume B didn't know the answer to his own question. Moreover, we would assume that A also knows that B's knowledge about him does not include the answer to that question. If this is the case, B1 is a relevant response in both speaker's minds.

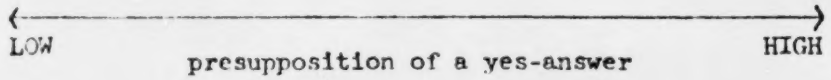
Alternatively, if we hear B follow A's statement by B2, we would be led to believe that down South is a relevant place for A to go and that A will think that down South is a relevant place to go. B2 would thus be relevant in spite of the fact that they had just met if certain facts were shared knowledge. This might be the case if this conversation took place in the midst of winter in a frigid Northern city and the news is full of how people are fleeing to the South to escape the rigours of the cold.

If A's statement were followed by B3, or B4 we would believe that B has an even greater knowledge about A and that both parties know it. This would occur when, for example, B and A have had previous contact and they both know that A wants to visit the South when the first opportunity comes along.

In the above exposition we do not mean to imply that only one form (B1, 2, 3, or 4) is necessarily the only relevant utterance in any given situation. In some cases, more than one form may be appropriate. For example, where we suggested B2 could be a relevant utterance to follow A's statement, B1 might also have been used. However, the use of B1 in a situation where B4 would be appropriate could only be done in a humorous vein with B pretending ignorance.

We have noted a succession and overlap of one form to the next as they related to shared knowledge. It is interesting to note that there is a parallel overlap of certain formal properties of these four utterances as well: B1 and B2 are similar in that they are both inverted, B2 and B3 in that they both have rising intonation, and B3 and B4 in that they are both statement form.

The remainder of this paper will be concerned with the domain of the yes/no questions, that is, those situations where a WH-question or a statement would not be relevant. When affirmative yes/no questions are posed, the speaker has varying degrees of certainty that the interlocutor will answer affirmatively. We will refer to this as presupposition of a yes-answer, and it is shown graphically in Figure 1 as a continuum ranging from low to high.




presupposition of a yes-answer

Figure 1

2.2 High presupposition of a yes-answer

Now let us consider some possible conversations between A and B, in which B holds high presupposition of a yes-answer. We will examine the forms of the question that reflect this presupposition, and the functions they fulfill in the discourse.

The first is one in which B's utterance essentially echo's A's, the so-called "echo" question.

(2) A: I'm studying poetry this term.

B: You're studying poetry this term?

We know B must have high presupposition of a yes-answer because of what A has just told him. Thus while B is not asking for information at all, his utterance could have other functions. The utterance could be a means for B to confirm his understanding of A's statement. It could indicate that A's statement contains new information or that B's previous knowledge was contradicted by A's statement. It could display B's interest in the information in A's statement. It could allow or encourage A to continue.

Now consider a correspondingly neutral-stressed inverted form question in the same situation as above.

(3) A: I'm studying poetry this term.

B: #Are you studying poetry this term?

(The symbol, #, indicates the sentence following it is a grammatical one but is inappropriate in the particular discourse in which it is shown.) This inverted form question fails to acknowledge A's statement. It signals low presupposition of a yes-answer when one would expect B to have high presupposition; thus it is not a relevant response from A's point of view.

The inverted form is acceptable if the stress is shifted:

(4) A: I'm studying poetry this term.

B: Ar'e you (studying poetry this term)?

(The diacritic, ', indicates the position of nuclear stress, while, ", indicates heavy or emphatic stress). Here, the auxiliary element carries the main stress. As observers of this exchange, we know that B has understood A. Furthermore, the same range of functions possible on the statement form questions in (2), are equally possible in this stress-shifted inverted form.

The same stress-shift to auxiliary element is possible on the statement form:

(5) A: I'm studying poetry this term.

B: You ar'e (studying poetry this term)?

As in (4) and (2) above, we know that B has understood A, and the same range of functions is still possible.

In the statement form, the stress could also have shifted to the subject NP:

(6) A: I'm studying poetry this term.

B: Yo'u're studying poetry this term?
or Yo'u (are studying poetry this term)?
or Yo'u are (studying poetry this term)?

Again this stress-shifted form indicates that B has understood A, and it may carry the same range of functions.

In addition to the functions discussed with example (2) above, there is one other that deserves special consideration. Any one of the questions in examples (4), (5) and (6) can be used to express B's opinions, emotions and assessments towards A's statement, including doubt, surprise, skepticism, challenge, disbelief, outrage or reversal of contradictory presupposition. The strength of any one of these may vary. These factors are grouped together because they are all expressed by varying amounts of phonological changes including syllable lengthening, exaggerated intonation rise and increased volume. We use the word EXPRESSION as a cover term for these factors. Thus the inverted question in (4) with stress shifted to the auxiliary element, when conveying EXPRESSION, might be read:

(7) ARE:: you (studying poetry this term)?

The facts covered in 2.2 are graphically displayed on the right-most portion of Figure 2 where the acceptable forms of yes/no questions when presupposition of a yes-answer is high are shown.

2.3 Low presupposition of a yes-answer.

The form of yes/no questions used to communicate low presupposition of a yes-answer is different from that used to express high presupposition of a yes-answer. Moreover, the range of meanings is restricted when presupposition is less.

First, the actual words used in B's question are not the same ones as in the previous speaker's utterance. None of the statement forms are permissible, nor are any of the stress-shifted forms (but see footnote 4), and as a result EXPRESSION cannot be conveyed. The only form we have found is a neutral inverted form. Situations in which the questioner has little presupposition of a yes-answer include those where he does not know the answer and is eliciting information, ('Did you take out the garbage?'), polite commands or requests ('Would you mind shutting the doors?', 'Do you know what time it is?'), topic change or attempts to get the floor, (Do you remember the girl who used to live upstairs?'), etc. Consider the example which follows:

(8) A: . . . job opportunities . . .

B: Here we are; thanks for the ride. Uh . . . Would you like to come in for a drink?

In example (8) we shall assume A is dropping B off at his home and on the way they've been talking about job opportunities. As they arrive at B's home, he asks if A would like a drink. In this situation B has low presupposition of a yes-answer, and can use the neutral inverted form. It changes the topic and/or asks for information. The same question would be inappropriate if asked in any statement form or stress-shifted inverted form.

## INTERACTION OF FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF AFFIRMATIVE YES/NO QUESTIONS

A: ...job opportunities...
B: Here we are; thanks for the ride. Uh...

A: We just got back from vacation.

A: I'm studying poetry.

FORMS:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| neutral inverted (optional ellipsis of AUX) | ...Would you like to come in for a drink? | B: Did you have a nice time? | |
| stress-shifted inverted (to AUX) | | | B: Aŕe you (studying poetry)? |
| neutral statement | | B: You had a nice time? | B: You're studying poetry? |
| stress-shifted statement (to subject NP) | | | B: Yóu're studying poetry?<br>B: Yóu (are studying poetry)?<br>B: Yóu are (studying poetry)? |
| stress-shifted statement (to AUX) | | | B: You aŕe (studying poetry)? |

PRESUPPOSITION OF A YES-ANSWER

LOW — HIGH

FUNCTIONS:

information elicitation → topic change; clarification of previous inappropriately answered yes/no question; asking a directed question

← understanding confirmation; acknowledgement of new or contradictory information; display of interest; encouragement; EXPRESSION

Figure 2

(9) A: . . . job opportunities . . .

B: Here we are; thanks for the ride. Uh . . .
#You'd like to come in for a drink? (neutral statement)
#You'd like to come in for a drink? (shifted statement)
#You would like to come in for a drink? (shifted statement)
#Would you like to come in for a drink? (shifted inverted)
#Would you like to come in for a drink? (shifted inverted?)

Each of these forms is inappropriate because it makes an incorrect assumption about what is shared knowledge.

Along with information elicitation and topic change, another function requiring the neutral inverted form is clarification of a previous inappropriately answered yes/no question. If A and B are conversing under conditions such that A replies to B's question inappropriately, (such as over a poorly connected telephone or at a loud party), if B continues to ask the question at all, he will likely choose a neutral inverted form. He abandons any presuppositions carried in his earlier question.

(10) A: We just got back from vacation.
B: You had a nice time?
A: We got back at 4:30. (inappropriate response)
B: Oh, but did you have a nice time? (clarification--neutral inverted form)
A: Yeah, it was nice.

Number (11) below is our last example of a neutral inverted question and in this case it is when a person is instructed to ask another person a yes/no question. The person who asks the directed question acts as though the topic were new and as if he had low presupposition of a yes-answer. This situation is created in a second language classroom or a speech data gathering situation in which the object is to elicit yes/no questions.

(11) Teacher: Ask Roberto if he saw Cannon last night.
Student: Did you see Cannon last night?
Roberto: Yes.

It would be inappropriate to respond to the teacher's directive with a statement form ('You saw Cannon last night?') even if the student and everyone else in the class knew what Roberto did the previous evening, because the whole activity is understood to be role-playing, in this case for language learning.

The information shown in examples (8-11) and accompaning discussion is summarized on the left-most portion of Figure 2. (Again, see footnote 2.) Both in function and form, the appropriate question in the low range of the continuum differs from those in the high range. In particular, the words B uses with low presupposition of a yes-answer are different from those of A that they follow, while those of B with high presupposition are essentially identical to A's. Furthermore, the neutral inverted form required in situations of low presupposition, is not possible in those of high presupposition, and likewise, the statement

and stress-shifted forms required in situations of high presupposition are not possible in those of low presupposition.

2.4. Intermediate presupposition of a yes-answer

Now let us consider that part of the continuum where presupposition of a yes-answer is somewhere between the low and high ranges. These are cases in which B is rather certain that A will answer affirmatively, not because of what A has just said as in the high range, but because of B's beliefs about reality that he and A share. There are two ways B can phrase this question and they are illustrated in (12):

(12) A: I just got back from vacation.

B: 1. Did you have a nice time?
or 2. You had a nice time?

Note that B's questions are not a syntactic echo of A's statement and in that regard they resemble the utterances in the low range. The neutral inverted form reflects one function of the low range, that of eliciting information. The use of the neutral statement form reflects one of the functions of the high range, that of confirming understanding. This is indicated by the arrows next to each of these functions, extending them further along the continuum. While in the cases discussed under the high range, B was confirming what A had just said, in example (12) B is checking an unstated assumption. We believe that B's use of this form indicates that he has a strong presupposition of a yes-answer, perhaps from his previous knowledge about A, from his experiences with vacations in general, or from his accumulated beliefs about reality. In a sense, the use of this form equates "nice time" to "vacation" in A's statement. However, we cannot predict from our own intuitions that B has this equivalency in his mind. Furthermore, if he used the neutral inverted form, we can only presume that he does not equate "nice time" with "vacation." We cannot be certain. Possibly some other factor keeps him from using the statement form--not wanting to sound presumptuous, for example, or wanting to give a false impression of his presupposition. Therefore, in this intermediate range of the continuum there need not be a one-to-one correspondence of form to presupposition. Furthermore, in this range, it is no longer meaningful to regard the choice of form as systematic or predictable. Giving a false impression of presupposition would constitute a manipulative use of language. Thus a speaker can misrepresent reality by using one form of a yes/no question where the other would have been more truthful. We can illustrate this sort of manipulative use of language by referring to example (1) which involved two speakers who had just met. For convenience the relevant parts are repeated here:

(1) A: My husband and I are going on vacation next week.

B: 2. Are you going down South?
3. You're going down South"

We pointed out that the use of B2 would be appropriate if certain facts concerning the hard winter weather were shared knowledge. We said further that B3 would be appropriate if A and B had had previous contact and knew each other well enough for B to be more certain that A would be going

South given the opportunity. Now notice how B's choice of form can mislead a co-participant C, who does not know A, into thinking that B knows A better than he does. B may think that it is highly likely that A will go South because of the bad weather and because he wishes to impress C, uses B3, the statement form question, thereby sounding as if he has "insider's knowledge." If A responds affirmatively, then C may fall for B's little ploy (but if A replies that they are not going South, then B's gamble may or may not succeed). On the other hand, if B knows A very well, but wishes C to think he doesn't, he may use the inverted form which implies less presupposition of a yes-answer, and he may lead C to think he doesn't know A well.

The statement form is so powerful a conveyer of presupposition that it can seemingly be used to manipulate the other speaker into giving the desired answer, even when that answer is contrary to fact. In a series of Doonesbury cartoons, Ms. Caucus was crushed to find that Andy would not return her romantic feelings. Andy however, wanted to maintain the friendship. In the face of knowing that she felt uncomfortable with him, he asked her, "We're still cool, then?" Ms. Caucus felt forced to respond, "Of course." Then she added, "Go away." indicating her true feelings. (Gary Trudeau, March 10, 1976)

Returning to the distribution of question forms with intermediate presupposition of a yes-answer, it should be noted that none of the stress-shifted forms would be possible in example (12):

(13) A: I just got back from vacation.

B: #You had a nice time?
#You had a nice time?
#Did you have a nice time?
#Did you have a nice time?

Stress-shifted forms imply that the neutral form is already part of the discourse which is the case in the right-most portion of Figure 2 where B's utterance repeats A's words, but is not the case in the example (13). In spite of a possible semantic similarity between A's statement and B's question in example (13) the words of B's question are not yet in fact part of the discourse until he utters them. The fact that the stress-shifted forms are not possible, means, moreover, that EXPRESSION, is not possible.

This discussion is summarized and appears in the center-most portion of Figure 2. The whole of Figure 2, then, is a graphic representation of the interrelationship between presupposition of a yes-answer, form, and function of a question.

Schlue (1975) tested the claim that statement form yes/no questions are used to question an assumption or verify a hunch. She found that stress shift combined with the phonological changes mentioned above which denote EXPRESSION, are very powerful conveyors of high presupposition of a yes-answer. Furthermore, the neutral statement form also conveys an expectation of a positive response. Native speakers were asked to listen to a tape containing contextualized yes/no questions of this sort:

(14) a. Are you planning to hire another waitress? (neutral inverted)
b. You're planning to hire another waitress? (neutral statement)
c. You're planning to hire another waitress? (stress-shifted statement)

The subjects were then asked to interpret each question according to the message they heard:

(A) The speaker has little or no idea whether the answer will be yes or no.
(B) The speaker has a hunch that the answer will be yes, and is testing that hunch.
(C) The speaker has a hunch that the answer will be yes, and is registering surprise, disbelief, or outrage.

The type represented by (14a) (neutral inverted) received the expected response (A) 80% of the time; type (14b) (neutral statement) received the expected response (B) 74% of the time; and type (14c) (stress-shifted statement) received the expected response (C) 97% of the time.

2.5 Ellipis of have, be and do-support

In spoken English, the auxiliaries have and be and do-support often do not appear in yes/no questions. This is illustrated in the following examples involving second person subjects.

(15) You ever been to San Francisco?

(16) You gonna travel during vacation?

(17) You wanna go to the store?

(18) You lose somethings?

When observing the usage of the various forms of yes/no questions in speech data, the problem arises whether such questions should be considered as being elliptical questions in inverted form or questions in full statement form. A question such as (17) above gives no indication of the related form.

(19) a. Do you wanna go to the store?
b. You wanna go to the store?
c. You wanna go to the store.

It could be that the auxiliary element, do, has been elided from its initial position in the equivalent inverted question (19)a. Or it could just as well be that the do never appeared at all because (19)b is in statement form and is related to a statement in which do-support does not surface (19)c. Consider, however, the following examples in which there is syntactic evidence to support a claim that such questions should be considered elliptical inverted.

(20) a. Have you ever been to San Francisco?
b. You ever been to San Francisco?
c. *You ever been to San Francisco.

(21) a. Are you gonna travel during vacation?
b. You gonna travel during vacation?
c. *You gonna travel during vacation.

(22) a. Did you lose something?
b. You lose something?
c. *You lose something.

If yes/no questions in statement form are related to grammatical statements, then the questions (20b, 21b, and 22b) above cannot possibly be related to statement form questions since the related statements (20c, 21c, and 22c) are ungrammatical. We would argue that the derivation of all such questions should be the same, relating them to the corresponding inverted form and not to the statement form yes/no questions.

There is further evidence to support the claim that such questions are elliptical inverted. Consider the distribution of the (b) questions in discourse; it is the same as that of the (a) questions. Consider a situation in which a wife walks into the living room on a Sunday afternoon and addresses her husband.

(23) a. Are you tired of sitting around?
b. You tired of sitting around?
c. You're tired of sitting around?

Both questions (a and b) are appropriate to this situation. The statement form question (23)c is not used to change topics (a function represented in the low range of presupposition), whereas both the inverted question in full form (23)a and the question with the elided auxiliary element (23)b do so. This semantic, or discourse-related justification, coupled with the syntactic justifications discussed above, is a strong indication of the equivalence of these questions to inverted questions in full form. They are then, elliptical yes/no questions, with the inverted auxiliary element elided.

It should be noted that there are no elliptical counterparts for the stress-shifted inverted form question in the high range. When the nuclear stress falls either on the auxiliary or on the subject NP of a yes/no question, the auxiliary element cannot be elided. Ellipsis of the auxiliary element cannot occur simply because a constituent in a sentence that carries the stress cannot be elided. Thus the inverted question in the high range (here example 24) cannot take on a form as in (25) without any nuclear stress at all:

(24) Are you (studying poetry this term)?

(25) You (studying poetry this term)?

The following inverted yes/no question is one in which the nuclear-stress is contrastive and falls on the subject NP.

(26) I know Jane wants to go to the store, but do you want to (go to the store)?

If the do were elided the result form would be the same as the statement form of the question. The statement form could equally well be used, but it would represent a different set of functions (those of high presupposition) than the inverted question above (those of low presupposition). In sum, only the neutral inverted form questions seen in the low range of the continuum permit ellipsis of auxiliary element.

Finally, it is still unclear as to whether all forms of have, be and do-support can be elided in all combinations of variables such as stative/nonstative verb, present/past context, first/second/third person, or pronominal/full subject. Campbell is currently testing the ellipsis of do-support in yes/no questions to see which of these factors affect its acceptability among native and non-native speakers.

3. Methodology

The data used in this study were collected by Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1975) and are that of two of their six subjects. The subjects were native speakers of Spanish. They were largely free learners acquiring English by exposure to the English-speaking environment and without formal instruction. They were visited approximately once every two weeks for a ten-month period. During these hour-long visits the researchers gathered both spontaneous and experimentally-elicited speech.

We began our investigation of the data by independently pulling the yes/no questions from the even-numbered transcripts. We then evaluated the corpus independently in the following manner. First we attempted to determine the question forms a native speaker would use in each discourse environment. Next we compared our so-called appropriate forms with the forms actually used by the non-native speaker. Then we came together and compared our judgments and tried to settle on one judgment for each item. Finally, we listened to the tapes in order to clarify our opinions in difficult cases.

3.1 Second language learner data

Initally during our analysis, some questions and their environments in the data seemed clear-cut and the evaluation procedure was rather straight-forward. Consider the following:

(27) (E=native speaker, C=non-native speaker)

E: . . . Okay, good. Wanna go see the mummies? (in a museum)

C: What (are) mummi(ies)?

E: Do you know what a mummy is?

C: No.

E: Well, it's a guy who died a long time ago. And they kept him all wrapped up and you can still see him. Sound interesting?

C: xxx xxx xxx xxx

E: Right.

C: Hey, is this a house?

E: It's a desk. See you put all the papers in here and notes and letters.

This example seems to display the type of question used to reflect low presupposition of a yes-answer. There is previous talk about mummies

(equivalent to the previous talk about job opportunities in the low range) and then apparently the learner (C) wants to ask a question that changes the topic and/or ellicits information. To accomplish this a native speaker would use the neutral inverted form, as did the learner.

The next sequence seems to exemplify the other end of the continuum, that is, high presupposition of a yes-answer.

(28) E: Did you see that building in Boston? The one that's all glass like that? I live near there.

C: You live there?

E: Yeah, near there. Near, around, in the back.

The learner's question is a near repetition of the experimenter's (E's) preceding remark. The learner is likely checking his understanding of the previous utterance. In this case, a native speaker could use a statement form, as did the learner.

Difficulties in our analysis procedure first arose with examples such as the following:

(29) (discussing camels)

E: And doesn't have, it, drink, it can go two weeks with no water. See, it drinks alot of water and puts it all up here in that hump on the top, and it saves water.

C: Yeah. And it, it, it can eat some gasoline, too?

E: It doesn't eat . . . It'd die from the gasoline.

Here the learner's yes/no question is in no way a repetition of a previous utterance by the experimenter. It is therefore not strictly a part of the high range. But we cannot define the amount of presupposition any further. We cannot know how strong the presupposition is that the experimenter will agree that camels can store gasoline as well as water in their backs. His presupposition may be weak; he may truly be asking whether this information is true or not. In this environment a native speaker would use a neutral inverted form, thus the learner's actual statement form would be inappropriate. The learner's presupposition, on the other hand, may be strong; it could well be a logical conclusion drawn from the information the learner has just heard about the capabilities of camels, coupled with his prior knowledge about automobiles. He would then have reason to assume that the experimenter will affirm the proposition and he would be checking that unstated assumption. In this case, a native speaker would use the neutral statement form as did the learner. In deciding which question form is appropriate to the discourse environment, it is necessary to know how much presupposition the learner has about the answer and it is impossible to measure that amount of presupposition from the discourse environment. Without knowing what presupposition is represented, it becomes impossible to determine whether the form of the question that the subject produces is appropriate or not.

Not only can we not judge the appropriateness of the question in (29), (and exchanges like this comprise a large part of the corpus)

we now believe one cannot conclusively judge the appropriateness of the learner's form in (27) and (28) either. It was stated above that in example (27) the learner likely has low presupposition. The main reason for drawing this conclusion is that the question used by the learner here is in neutral inverted form, which reflects low presupposition. However, it could just as well be that the learner sees the object and really does believe that what he sees is some kind of a house. His presupposition of a yes-answer might indeed be very high and the neutral inverted form that he used would fail to reflect his true amount of presupposition. In this case, he would have made an error and formed his question inappropriately. Similarly, the learner might have had some reason in example (28) to have low presupposition, e.g., perhaps he did not hear or understand when the experimentor said that he lived there. Maybe the learner really did want to ask a question eliciting information. If this were the case, he used the wrong form.

The requirement of relevance in discourse permits one to use the form to get at the amount of presupposition of a yes-answer in a native speaker of English. It was on this basis that Figure 2, depicting the interrelationship of form and presupposition, was developed. With non-native speakers, however, there is no variable that reflects whether the non-native speaker has internalized the interrelationship of form and presupposition. One can not know if his forms of yes/no questions correctly reflect the amount of presupposition he has. Thus, without a means of measuring presupposition independently from form, we cannot say which form a non-native speaker should use. For these reasons then, second language researchers cannot determine when the acquisition of inverted and statement form occurs in second language learners.

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